



Archipel

Études interdisciplinaires sur le monde insulindien

100 | 2020

Varia

Andrea Acri, Kashshaf Ghani, Murari Jha, and Sraman Mukherjee (eds.), *Imagining Asia(s): Networks, Actors, Sites*. Singapore: ISEAS - Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2019, 438 pages, index, illustrations. Soft cover: ISBN: 978-981-4818-85-8

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/archipel/2153>

DOI: 10.4000/archipel.2153

ISSN: 2104-3655

Publisher

Association Archipel

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2020

Number of pages: 227-230

ISBN: 978-2-910513-84-9

ISSN: 0044-8613

Electronic reference

Anthony Reid, « Andrea Acri, Kashshaf Ghani, Murari Jha, and Sraman Mukherjee (eds.), *Imagining Asia(s): Networks, Actors, Sites*. Singapore: ISEAS - Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2019, 438 pages, index, illustrations. Soft cover: ISBN: 978-981-4818-85-8 », *Archipel* [Online], 100 | 2020, Online since 28 November 2020, connection on 04 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/archipel/2153> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/archipel.2153>

Association Archipel

COMPTES RENDUS

Asie

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This book has a lineage. Its laudable aim is to further the “rapprochement” between South and Southeast Asia, “whose deeply connected histories have been forgotten for a long time,” by seeking new bases for coherent reintegration. First the 1941 collapse of the unifying British naval dominance from Aden to Hong Kong, then nationalism, notably on display in the rift between Sukarno and Nehru at the 1955 Bandung Conference, and finally the US model of Area Studies basing funding on separate South, Southeast and East Asian Centres, created a wide gulf of incomprehension in the Bay of Bengal. Whereas China remained an important factor in Southeast Asia whether as friend or foe, India seemed to be strangely absent for a half-century despite the shared ancient languages, scripts, iconography, religions and mythologies. Part of the problem was precisely the commonalities between India and the “Indianized states” of Southeast Asia in the past and the way it was interpreted. At one of our first conferences in Singapore to try to breach the gap, an Indian archaeologist explained to this Southeast Asianist, “Since you objected to our ‘Greater India,’ we just don’t know how to talk about Southeast Asia.”

The key players in this recent historical “rapprochement” have been India, notably its Nalanda University in Bihar, and Singapore, notably its Nalanda

Sriwijaya Centre at ISEAS. Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen popularised the idea of ancient Buddhist Nalanda as a model for an Indian transnational university of today, and the idea was endorsed by George Yeo, the equally visionary and well-read Foreign Minister of Singapore (2004-11). The endorsement was obtained of the Indian Government and the East Asia Summit (2007) for a new international university, constituted in 2010 with Amartya Sen as first Chancellor. The vision of using the ‘Buddhist cosmopolis’ of the first common millennium as the symbolic base for reconciliation appealed to (Christian) Yeo and mostly non-Buddhist others at ISEAS and NUS in Singapore, in part because of the way Southeast Asia’s Sriwijaya had been a Buddhist mediator and interpreter between China and India, as Singapore (and ASEAN) again aspired to be. The founding of the Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) within ISEAS, with initial funds both from Yeo’s Foreign Ministry and Singapore’s wealthy Bright Hill Buddhist Monastery, celebrated Sriwijaya as a forebear of Singapore, the place where Chinese and other Buddhist pilgrims learned languages, translated scriptures, and lubricated the interaction between the two poles of Asian civilization. Its aim was and is to research “historical interactions among Asian societies and civilisations.”

The founders have moved on, Nalanda University has been politicized and conflicted under Modi, but the enterprise persists. Two remarkable Indian Sinologists, Prasenjit Duara and Tansen Sen, used their positions in Singapore to promote the study of Asian cultural interactions. Numerous conferences were held, including the inspiration for this book, “Imagining Asia(s): Networks, Actors, Sites,” hosted by NSC in Singapore in October 2016. It was jointly sponsored by Nalanda University, with which six of its thirteen authors were associated. One hopes these initiatives will continue, though the conference was held at a fragile time as Amartya Sen and George Yeo both turned their backs on Nalanda.

So, did this conference produce a notable advance in finding common ground? The “idea of Asia” evidently did not prove up to the task, as its ambivalent pluralising attests. Farish Noor’s opening essay addresses precisely the epistemology of “Asia,” but finds it doomed by its inherent development as Europe’s exotic ‘other’. He, indeed, pins his hopes on “the social sciences and humanities, where critical theory now holds sway” with “a healthy incredulity of meta-narratives” (p. 34). In contrast, the lead contribution of the editors by Andrea Acri welcomes what he sees as a new trend to reject “the negative perception of grand narratives” since the 1990s in favour of “connective scholarship seeing comparative coherence to periods” (p. 52). He proposes “Maritime Asia” as the most helpful concept to identify a succession of different dominant networks in the Indian Ocean, from Sanskrit cosmopolis through to Pali, Tamil and Islamic networks. This is indeed a common trend of recent decades, and will be welcomed by many scholars of Northeast and Southeast Asia who have been pursuing it for some time.

Among the papers that follow, a couple venture their own broad hypotheses about the theme. Italian art historian Frederica Broilo in “Interconnectedness and Mobility in the Middle Ages/Nowadays” argues that globalisation is “a very old story” by noting some interactions between Islamicate and East Asian cultures both in Tang/Abbasid times and recently. Tantric Buddhism specialist Iain Sinclair seeks to identify Sanskritic Buddhism as a distinct form of Buddhist universalism, a minority everywhere in contrast to both canonical Prakrit and local vernaculars. Though conceding that “living Sanskritic traditions have miniscule populations, diminishing bases of support, low profiles, and no allies or ambitions,” this detached tradition nevertheless has the unique authority of the truly universal (p. 320).

Most of the remaining papers are more narrowly-focussed and marginal to the stated theme, though all have something to add about specific episodes of boundary-crossing. Historical sociologist Gopa Sabharwal, Nalanda University’s first Vice-Chancellor, discusses the hopes and conflicts of India’s first attempt to take the lead in defining the new post-war Asia, the Delhi ‘Asian Relations’ conference of 1947. Despite its outrage that Tibet was invited to send an independent delegation, nationalist China offered to host a second conference in 1949, perhaps as a way of ensuring that India did not dominate the future with its unrealized plan for an ongoing Council headed by Nehru. One of the other unrealized decisions of the conference was that each Asian country should set up an “academic institute” for the study of Asia’s history and culture (p. 81). Sabharwal concludes that the idea of Asia “is a dynamic concept that will continue to be cast and recast over time” (p. 88), and ends with the more practical achievements of the Asian Games, also launched in Delhi (1951).

Two more Indian papers look how European writers used Asia to serve their preoccupations. Historian Murari Jha uses François Valentijn’s depiction of Hindu societies in the Tamil area as a model of knowledge transmission and construction. English literature specialist Anjana Sharma charts the influence of Asian imaginings on the English romantics - Coleridge, Shelley, Byron and Keats.

Mahmud Kooria’s empirically rich paper introduces the Islamic concept of *ribat*, a pattern of fortifications on the Malabar coast of modern Kerala for ocean-oriented Muslim communities with few friends in the hinterland. Practically, they could be seen as response and counterpoint to Portuguese coastal forts, but they formed part also of the invocation to *jihad* by Qadi Muhammad al-Kalikuti, who wrote around 1570. Although Kooria’s comparative ambition is only to West Asia, his exploration of al-Kalikuti will be of interest to those working on sixteenth century Aceh, another leg in the Turkish-inspired general anti-Portuguese offensive of 1570-1.

There follow three fascinating if speculative attempts to track religious connections around the Indian Ocean. South Africa-based Brazilian Fernando Rosa takes an unusually Melaka-centred view of Islamicate sacred tombs,

which he seeks to generalize through “Monsoon Asia” from a more thorough study of the *keramat* of Melaka, analogous to South Asian *dargah*. There seems a contradiction in his seeking to combat Muslim extremism through a deeper understanding of heterodox popular practices on the one hand, and on the other insisting that we must seek the source of such practices in Tantrism and female power- hardly the most helpful argument for besieged old-style Muslims. Sraman Mukherjee explores the topical issue of the value of Buddhist relics and their reliquaries to archaeologists, to Buddhist believers, and to the Muslim owners of the archaeological sites. Colonial authority and sources allow him to trace both the discovery in 1909 of Buddhist relics at an archaeological site on Muslim land in the Northwest Frontier region, and their eventual appreciation in Mandalay. Kashshaf Ghani examines the connections formed by the pilgrimage of Bengalis to the Hejaz, drawing particularly on two Bengali newspapers of the early twentieth century with differing views around the Caliphate.

Two final empirical papers on Southeast Asia appear not to fit so well into the generally India-centric themes of the remainder. Emerging historian Vu Duc Liem offers a sophisticated analysis of Cochin China, the controversial southern Viet kingdom, as a place of mediation between East and Southeast Asia. Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz gives a report on recent ceramic finds in the Minangkabau (Sumatra) area of Tanah Datar, and proposes Bukit Gombak there as the probable site of Adityavarman’s fourteenth century kingdom.

In a publishing climate increasingly difficult for conference volumes, we should be grateful to ISEAS Yusuf Ishak for publishing this significant collection. Yes, the whole in this case probably is greater than the sum of its parts, not least because of the disagreement around some big themes. Some parts, on the other hand, might have been better served as electronically accessible journal articles. One hopes the publisher can find ways to make them available in both traditional and new formats.

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Asie du Sud-Est

Nathalie Fau et Benoît de Tréglodé (sous la direction de), *Mers d’Asie du Sud-Est. Coopérations, intégration et sécurité*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2018, 394 p. ISBN : 978-2-271-11826-4

Ce passionnant ouvrage consacré aux mers d’Asie du Sud-Est vient combler un manque dans la littérature francophone sur le sujet. Le livre collectif *Mers d’Asie du Sud-Est* publié sous la direction conjointe de Nathalie Fau et de